

Online Collaboration

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Business in Calgary – August 2007

It used to be that when a corporate team had a problem, they would collaborate in meeting rooms, on conference calls or online via virtual meetings. And when business leaders wanted to boost learning and professional development opportunities, they looked to a plethora of programs offered in classrooms or onsite in the office. Now, a new technology tool is allowing those collaborations and continuous learning to occur at the same time, in the same place – a virtual community on the Internet. George Paolini and his team first got the idea when studying Wikinomics, a “survival toolkit” and book written by Don Tapscott and Anthony Williams, which delves into the major forces revolutionizing business collaboration and learning. Paolini, producer of Insight, a rapidly emerging online collaboration platform on the Internet, says the concept is meant to open up a new world of expert information and establishes learning communities that are targeted to solving specific, real-world problems. “When you look at what’s going on in the world around social networking, where people are getting online and... looking for information, no one to date has really stepped up to try and figure out how communities can come together to collaborate,” he says, “not just to look at data, but to actually start using it and putting it into action.” Paolini points to an example used by Wikinomics as one of the drivers behind the launch of Insight, which allows data analysts from all industries to come together in an online community to collectively solve problems posed by other members. Insight is owned by Business Objects SA, a business intelligence software company. It was 1999 when Rob McEwen, chief executive of Goldcorp Inc., faced reality.

The small gold-mining company was taken over by a group of investors and the financial picture of the firm was bleak. McEwen was adamant that the company had to find more gold in its existing resources, or else. After attending a conference at MIT for professional development, he uncovered a potential answer to Goldcorp's problems.

A Linux-based, open-source model allowed Goldcorp to take a massive amount of data the company had on its mines and make it available to industry experts via this online tool using a competition to seek answers as to how to unlock more resources from the mines. "What happened was quite remarkable," says Paolini. "The responses were numerous and in a wide variety of disciplines. The net result was they tripled their output in the gold mines and the value of the company went from about \$100 million to \$10 billion over the next four or five years."

It's those results that Paolini is trying to help other companies achieve, while simultaneously providing a platform for experts from all walks of life to come together and have a place for ongoing professional development. But what would motivate a company to unlock some of their traditionally guarded corporate secrets and unleash it to the world? "Part of this for us is education with companies in terms of what really does constitute proprietary data in a world today where almost everything is out in the open," says Paolini. "There is a new approach to business which is really more transparent."

He says many companies stand to benefit from posing these types of challenges online using Insight or similar concepts because companies can still protect their most sensitive information. At the same time, for a specific problem or where there is an entire industry challenge relevant to all companies – think Alberta's oilsands – the benefits are clear.

The Goldcorp example, says Paolini, should serve as a prime example of how a company, when it reaches out to the broader expert community around the world, can achieve astounding results when it wasn't able to solve them in-house. Insight targets business and data analysts in all fields. Simultaneously, those experts working within the company are exposed to a wider set of skills and can incorporate those lessons into their ongoing development and project work.

As a way to illustrate the model, Insight has

joined with Zerofootprint in Ontario to pose an initial challenge as part of its One Million Dollar Bounty Challenge. To help get things started, Insight will sponsor the \$1-million cash reward for innovative solutions on a particular problem over a 12-month period. Eventually, the goal is to have companies sponsor the challenge, but Insight will kick in the cash for the first round. The first challenge is around solutions to help stop global warming and reducing the “environmental footprint” left by companies and organizations.

Through its parent company, Business Objects, Insight has also launched Open Book, a collaborative book project in the traditional publishing business being written by Bernard Liataud that will seek the input of experts using Insight themed around next-generation enterprises and how an enterprise can transform itself through the effective use of intelligence.

Dan Pontefract, senior director of Business Object’s University of Business Intelligence, says the entire online collaboration approach being taken by Insight is also reflective of the company’s goal of breaking down generational barriers. About 20 per cent of Business Objects’ own employee base is baby boomers, 60 per cent are Gen X and 20 per cent are Gen Y. “As we’re increasing the number of Gen X and Gen Y into the company, we started to look at additional social networking bits of education (and) competence transfer we could start thinking about from a sharing perspective,” says Pontefract.

Transfer of knowledge is a big game these days and online collaboration tools are being hailed as one potential tool to assist in that transfer of knowledge. “From the point of collaboration and ultimately ensuring there are no bottlenecks in this world of competence transfer, we are providing opportunities for our employees to share their competence (and) provide the knowledge gain as opposed to just waiting on some corporate university to provide it for them,” he says.

Later this year, the company is launching another social collaboration website that will incorporate audio and video feeds with a “YouTube-esque” feel, building on its existing projects. All of this is really the next logical evolution of the online learning frenzy that has seen the rise of various models of online learning into professional development and skills training.

Formal education programs offered by a wide range of institutions in Calgary have leveraged technology to make training and education more accessible to professionals in all fields on their own terms in the past five years as technology has improved. Now, it's common for people to take formal, online professional development courses, access training online at their desks or do a combination of face-to-face, classroom learning supplemented by online support and collaboration. Insight, claim the company's spokespeople, is simply taking that trend to the next level.

Since companies are investing so heavily in transfer of knowledge technology in anticipation of a baby boomer exodus, more solutions are needed, they claim. Formal education programs certainly have a very important role to play and will continue to do so, but Pontefract maintains that informal learning using tools such as Insight may help individuals acquire more skills and solve the real-world problems facing companies.

"If you think about it from formal education to informal education, there's a chasm there," explains Pontefract. "We will always have the need for instructor-led training, for formal e-learning and the need for the formal development aspect of someone's career or learning path, but there's also an element where several studies have suggested that between 60 to 80 per cent of one's learning is done in an informal, on-the-job sense."

As Insight and Business Objects push their new medium to the wider business community across Canada and, indeed, the world, the company is also trying to demonstrate its value proposition by walking the talk. "If you enable the employee base with ways in which to collectively share the intellect that they've gained over time, rather than waiting on the formal nature of learning to actually consumer that knowledge, it behooves each and every one of us to do more on-the-job, informal training," says Pontefract.